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ABSTRACT

Comparisons of television shows along genre lines suggest significant elements of aural/visual richness as well as valuable categories of comparison for future use in other comparisons. An examination of two sitcoms and two police shows produced roughly 25 years apart--"Make Room for Daddy" with "The Cosby Show" and "Naked City" with "Cagney and Lacy"--serves as illustration. Each of the dramas has a similar structure which establishes a series of expected, juxtaposed, and differing aural/visual environments. Teasers, commercials that appear just a few seconds before the actual show begins, first present quick images and words to hook the viewer. Next, the shows' identifying title sequence follows, its primary function being to prepare the viewers for the shows' moods and characters. Finally, each show ends with a typical closing scene, and is followed by its closing title sequence, commercials, and closing credit sequences. All these elements either help to frame the structures of the shows they are part of, or in some sense to rupture the shows' frames. Although each show depicts an essentially middle class world peopled by healthy and attractive principal characters, differences do exist between the two eras of shows. Differences in dress, setting, space, music, and noise all affect character presentation in subtle ways. For the most part these help to frame and reinforce the worlds of the shows, which in turn partly generate the character traits presented. (KEH)

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Title Sequences, Dress, Settings, and Such

Television studies, being a relatively new scholarly endeavor, has not as yet developed a rich historical framework, although efforts to create what might be called a body of stories are surely steadily multiplying. One area where not a great deal of work has been done is that of simple comparisons along genre lines. How do specific shows from one era of television differ from similar shows in another era? To approach this question I decided to examine similar shows produced roughly twenty-five years apart: a sitcom and a police show from the early sixties--Make Room for Daddy and Naked City, and similar shows from the mid-eighties, The Cosby Show and Cagney & Lacy. My interest was to expand my analysis of the aural/visual elements, especially character presentation, of shows that I had previously studied (Bell). In particular, I decided to focus on structures infrequently discussed.

Teasers, Title Sequences, and Commercials

All of the dramas studied, in a broad sense, have structures similar to Himmelstein's description of television melodrama: "In television melodrama, the structure is motivated by the flow of the program-segment-music-commercial sequences" (Television Myth 160). Each of the dramas is organized in the following general pattern:

- 1) identifying title sequence set to the show's theme music,
- 2) commercials, 3) opening sequence, which usually presents, at its

beginning, credits displayed over active images accompanied by mood-setting music (with the exception of Make Room for Daddy), 4) commercials, 5) a series of sequences of program and commercials, and 6) the closing credits set to music.

In aural/visual terms, this structure establishes a series of expected, juxtaposed, and differing aural/visual environments. What is often called flow, by critics following Williams (86-94), in aural/visual terms might better be regarded as ruptures, given the sharp contrasts in aural/visual environments, and this is especially true when the commercial sequences are opposed to normal program sequences. Based on a norm of program sequences, that is typical dramatic action in a television drama, commercials are hyped in all manners both aural and visual. They are loud, they move quickly, and a viewer is likely to see four or more of them at any commercial break. At one break in an episode of The Cosby Show, for example, we meet first a quiet old man in a Kodak commercial. Then we are thrust into a noisy toy commercial filled with kids on the way to a toy store, as if they were on the road to Oz. Following this we meet happy cats in a partly animated commercial for Happy Cat cat food. Finally, we are thrown into a rapid moving teaser for Family Ties. Ultimately, it is an aural/visual relief to return to the quieter, more stable aural/visual world of The Cosby Show.

Teasers are the first element in the overall show sequence. In the shows studied only Cagney & Lacey uses them. Teasers are commercials for a show, and they usually appear just a few seconds before an actual show begins. Their standard form is rapid melodramatic compression of a show's narrative--a few quick images and words to

hook the viewer. In terms of character traits, they prepare the viewer for the character traits that presumably will sell the coming show. For example, in the Cagney & Lacey teaser before a show that focuses on the dangers of toxic waste, we meet an upset and stoical Mary Beth. She is fearful of having cancer, and presumably our sympathy for her duress will motivate us to watch this episode. At the same time, we are also prepared for two of the important character traits presented in the episode.

The show's identifying title sequence usually follows shortly, or directly after the teaser, as in the case of Cagney & Lacey, and its primary functions are to get the viewers into the show's mood and reintroduce the viewers to the show's characters. The identifying title sequences for each of the four shows studied do this in different ways: the sitcoms stress family togetherness; Naked City stresses the city and the story to be told, and Cagney & Lacey focuses on police work, female friendship, and home life.

Finally, each show ends with a typical closing scene, followed by its closing title sequence. The sitcoms generally close by gathering the family together; Naked City pulls the camera back as the narrator recites the famous "There are eight million stories. . .," and Cagney & Lacey usually freeze frames the last intimate action of the two main characters. Commercials follow these final scenes, and the shows finally end with their closing credit sequences.

All of the elements mentioned in this section either help to frame the structures of the shows they are part of, or in some sense they rupture the shows' frames.

Dress, Setting, Space, and Music and Noise

The physical world of both sitcoms and both police shows is essentially a middle class world peopled by healthy and attractive principal characters. It is also a professional world of police officers, entertainers, doctors, and lawyers. To say this is to report that the shows studied reflect the norm of television (Comstock 34-5). Character traits reflecting attributes such as physical beauty, stylishness of dress, wealth, and taste in decor are static traits in the shows studied, and essentially they are always present in similar ways. Cliff is not handsome, nor is he ugly. Danny is roughly equally handsome. Clair and Kathy are both attractive. Chris is as attractive as Clair and Kathy, and Mary Beth is attractive, but perhaps a little dumpy.

Besides the fact that the 1960 shows are presented in black and white and the 1985 shows are presented in color, probably the most striking visual difference between the shows of the two eras is the difference in formality of dress. By and large the 1960 shows are dressed formally, and the 1985 shows informally. In the 1960 shows, principal male characters wear ties, suits, and hats; principal females wear skirts or dresses. In the 1985 shows, dress tends to be informal, with the exception of Lieutenant Bert Samuels in Cagney & Lacey, who virtually always wears a tie, and a suit with a vest; but even in his case, formality is generally relaxed because he is usually seen at his desk with his tie pulled down, his jacket off, and his sleeves rolled up.

The general effect of the formal codes of dress of the 1960's shows, and this is especially true of Naked City, is to reinforce the show world's

sense of orderliness. Policemen wear suits or uniforms. They look like business professionals. They use their reason to catch criminals whom they attempt to understand psychologically. Naked City's most prominently presented traits all stress the orderly universe presented in the show's dress code.

Cagney & Lacey, on the other hand, presents a much more complicated world of dress. Mike and Frank and Adam each only seem to possess one suit of clothes. But Chris and Mary Beth, although they wear clothes that reflect their middle-class incomes and personalities, are constantly in different outfits. They wear pants; they wear dresses; they wear suits; they wear many coats; they wear pajamas; they wear T-shirts; they wear sweat shirts and sweat pants; they sometimes are naked under the covers on a bed. What is true for them is also true for the other detectives we meet at the police station. Their dress ranges all the way from scruffy to formal.

As in Naked City, the message that dress conveys is present in the character traits presented. The world of Cagney & Lacey is troubled, realistic, stoical, ironic. Dress provides a code of order; Bert is the principal authority figure, but at best he represents the limited ability of the police to understand or control the complex world in which they work. One catches criminals in Cagney & Lacey, sometimes; one does not come to understand the sociological reasons for their criminality and feel for them, as in Naked City.

Dress in the 1985 shows, especially in The Cosby Show, also has a new function it did not have in the 1960's. Dress now sells both causes and a look. Seventeen magazine in an article by Anka Radakovich has

studied the creation of the "Cosby look." And anyone with teenage children and yuppie aspirations is aware of the look's elements and its presence in everyday dress. In addition, The Cosby Show often features T-shirts with college names. In one of the episodes studied, Cliff wears a Howard University T-shirt, and Rudy wears a Princeton University sweatshirt. Cosby, the educator, is clearly at work promoting, one would assume, his idea of the best colleges for his teenage viewers.

Setting and the presence of space convey similar messages to dress. Space is more fluid in the 1985 shows than in the 1960 shows, and the television frame tends to be more filled with people. In The Cosby Show, outside shots of the Huxtable house mark the passing of time in a day, just as seasonal clothes changes mark the passing of time in the year. Characters move from living room to kitchen in one shot, without obvious cuts for opening doors. Mobile cameras, of course, help create this fluidity. On Make Room for Daddy, the time always seems to be Spring, and each room has its place with its prescribed door and function. Both sitcoms tend to fill the television frame with people, but in Make Room for Daddy, as in Naked City, the group counts most, the family as a whole, whereas in The Cosby Show, the individual up-close counts most, and in Cagney & Lacey, sometimes it is the individual up-close that counts most and sometimes the group.

In Naked City Mike's office is a fairly large room, closed off from the squad room. It is a place where Adam gets out the blackboard to outline the problems of a case, and a place to discuss, with Frank and Mike, possibilities for their solutions. It is a place where prisoners are interrogated. In Cagney & Lacey Bert's office is a tiny glassed-in room

with shades. He is the superior officer, but he is not separated from the almost chaotic background activity of the squad room. In Naked City the police station is a place for reasoning, for being attentive, for restraining prisoners, for sharing a few private moments of friendly joking. It is a relatively orderly and quiet universe. On the contrary, in Cagney & Lacey, the police station is a place of constant change and activity, of signing in and signing out, of constant paper pushing and phone answering, of sarcasm, and ribbing, and troubles with parents and lovers.

Finally, some thoughts about music and noise. All the shows use music as an aural identifier. Each has a show theme which frames the character traits presented: Danny is a sweet and loveable father/boy, despite his emotional and bombastic nature; Cliff is an upbeat and amusing husband; Mike and Frank and Adam are out there in the naked city serving the troubled with compassion; Chris and Mary Beth are on the move, fighting their ways up their career ladders, tough, assertive modern women. And we know all of these character traits in part from the shows' musical themes and the title sequences that go with them.

Music, as Himmelstein has written, also indicates the end of program sequences and the impending appearance of commercials. It serves as a constant reminder that the show sells the commercials and that the ranges and dispositions of character traits presented are often controlled by commercial interests. In aesthetic terms this often means that principal characters may experience trouble of many sorts, even the threat of cancer, as in Cagney & Lacey, but by the last scene and its upbeat musical transition into the last set of commercials before the final

closing titles, all should be well in the manner of good melodrama. The television world may be disorderly and troubled, but it cannot be tragic. Tragedies always end. Television dramas must keep on running.

Sitcoms make little use of music. Their noises are laughs, and laughs are registered in high frequencies of traits such as joking, or wise-guy, or happy, or amusing. Police shows make considerable use of music and background noises. For the most part police show music reinforces traits that are already present, or serves to reinforce the atmosphere of a setting. Anxious sounding music accompanies a character's anxiety. For example, Mary Beth's anxiety as she speaks on the phone to the doctor about her cancer test at the end of a toxic waste episode is accented by tense-sounding music. In this case, the show ends with Mary Beth's relief and a resolved musical chord progression, at the same time.

Occasionally music foreshadows character traits, usually when impending stress is near, and only infrequently does music carry on what might be called a dialog with itself, as a reflection of conflict between two characters. One instance of this comes to mind in all the shows studied. As Chris and Mary Beth leave an Afgani's house and walk along Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, middle eastern music is played, and subtly underneath it one hears the vague presence of Bob Dylan's "How many roads. . ." Chris and Mary Beth are debating the values of Afgani and American cultures at the time, and the music, which apparently reflects the middle eastern setting, on another level, because of the subtle intercutting of the familiar notes of the Dylan song, takes up the positions debated, and perhaps even comments on their complexity as well.

Background sounds are most richly present in Cagney & Lacey. In part, this is probably because modern sound equipment is superior to equipment used in the sixties, and recording sounds as well as adding tracks of sounds to images is a relatively common and inexpensive process now. For the most part, background sounds in Cagney & Lacey, as well as the rest of the shows, reinforce the presentation of a natural reality, what is usually called realism. In general, one hears what one expects to hear, given the place characters are, and given what they are doing. If one listens closely, however, one sometimes finds a busier sound presence than one expects--loud and multiple typewriter sounds, for example, without the visible presence of batches of typewriters.

A similar effect is present in Cagney & Lacey backgrounds also. They are usually filled with people on the move, and they give the sense of a crowded and active city or police station life, but if one looks at the background actions carefully, sometimes they also seem unnatural. And one begins to feel that at times both background action and background noise do more than present reality. Like music, they color it and reinforce in subtle and essentially unconscious ways a world view as well as character traits presented. Mostly, we feel the presence of a natural world, but sometimes we sense a staged natural world, a hyped world, and this is especially sensed at times in Cagney & Lacey because of frenetic background action.

In short, dress, setting, space, music, and noise, all affect character presentation in subtle ways. For the most part they help to frame and reinforce the worlds of the shows, which in turn partly generate the character traits presented.

Conclusion

Clearly, in a short paper like this, one can only touch on a few elements of the rich tapestries comparisons of excellent shows can generate. Hopefully, those comparisons presented suggest significant elements of the aural/visual richness of the four shows studied, as well as valuable categories of comparison for future use in other comparisons.

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